



State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



Testimony of
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Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify for the Connecticut Commission on Children in support of Raised S.B. 1138, *An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws*.

I have chosen to begin my testimony with these names:

Hope Witsell	Justin Aaberg	Asher Brown
Seth Walsh	Phoebe Prince	Carl Joseph Walker Hoover
Christian Taylor	Tyler Clementi	Samantha Kelly

The names listed above are just some of the young people in the United States who have been bullied in the past two years -- and who, as a result, took their own lives.

And two more names: J. Daniel Scruggs of Meriden Alexa Berman of Brookfield
These are two of the Connecticut children who have committed suicide as a result of bullying by their schoolmates. Daniel died in 2002 after being pushed, hit, choked, kicked, made fun of, and having his belongings stolen. His story was an impetus for the 2002 law that called on schools to take action on bullying.

Alexa died in 2008 after being cyberbullied. Former friends tormented her in person and online via instant messages and photos. Her mother testifies before this committee today. Perhaps Alexa's story will be a driving force for legislative action this year.

These accounts remind us that bullying, harassment and mean behavior -- when left unchecked -- can have terrible consequences. We commend the Education Committee for raising S.B. 1138 to advance a comprehensive bullying prevention effort.

Bullying has lifelong consequences. Research tells us bullying impacts learning, safety, and personal well-being. According to the Connecticut School Health Survey, Connecticut high school students who report being bullied are more likely to get less sleep, miss school because they feel unsafe, have property stolen at school, carry a weapon to school, experience dating

violence, be depressed and attempt suicide. Schools can become violent, dangerous places where children feel unsafe to go and less able to concentrate and learn.

One in four (25 percent) Connecticut high school students – and 35 percent of the state's 9th graders – reported having been bullied or harassed on school property this past year. Over 900,000 U.S. high school students reported being cyberbullied in one year. Many elementary and middle school children also experience bullying and other mean-spirited behavior.

Kevin Jennings of the U.S. Department of Education told a packed forum sponsored by the Commission on Children in November, every school should have a clear policy against bullying behaviors, train all staff who interact with students, ensure that all staff members take immediate action when bullying is observed, and gather data to assess bullying. S.B. 1138 would take all of these steps.

S.B. 1138 contains several improvements to the bullying law. It requires swift action when bullying occurs, setting a specific timeline for action when alleged bullying occurs, requiring school employees to take immediate action, and bringing the investigation to a close within ten days. It makes all school employees – including those who drive the school bus or mop the floor – mandated reporters of bullying who must contact the school's bullying specialist upon witnessing or hearing any report of bullying. The definition of school employees as every adult that has regular contact with students is an essential feature of the legislation.

The bill's designation of a Safe School Awareness Day in January should be revised to become instead an entire week, perhaps called a Week of Respect, at the start of each school year in August or September for student, faculty, staff and parent dialogue on bullying and the expected role of each person in preventing it and building a positive school climate. These weeklong activities could be accompanied by simultaneous state government events and media messages designed to reinforce the school dialogue and activities.

The bill involves parents throughout the process – requiring that they be promptly notified of bullying involving their child and invited to meet with school officials. The bill also requires the school to communicate to parents the measures being taken to ensure the bullied student's safety and to prevent further acts of bullying. All parents will be given a written copy of the district's safe school environment plan (what is called a bullying "policy" under current law) each fall. Parents and students will be invited by their local school board to provide input to any proposed amendments to the district's safe school plan. The Commission supports these strategies to engage parents, along with the continued current-law language encouraging schools to involve parents in bullying prevention through school meetings and trainings.

The bill requires all school employees to be annually trained, with appropriate exceptions for schools that employ an evidence-based model approach. This is a bold expansion over the current-law training requirement for teachers, administrators, and pupil personnel. It is essential that not only those three categories but also hallway monitors, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians and all employees who interact with students work from the same page on bullying prevention. S.B. 1138 gives the State Department of Education an important directive to craft a training module that provides a common starting point for every school employee to help

respond to bullying and build positive school climate. In Section 5 of the bill, we hope that teachers, administrators and pupil personnel will continue to be subject to the in-service training requirements of current law, with the hope that such training will be conducted at an appropriately high standard, even while all other employees receive "annual training" under Section 6. In other words, it would be unfortunate if an unintentional consequence of adding training for all employees were to decrease the quality of training already provided to some employees.

We also recommend the elimination of "dissemination of reading materials" (line 295) as a training option under Section 6. Such dissemination would potentially negate the purpose of this training provision by permitting employees to avoid participation in training activity. Giving someone something to read does not mean that they will be trained.

Under S.B. 1138, the State Department of Education would identify evidence-based models in bullying prevention and intervention. As the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention held yesterday revealed, those evidence-based approaches are well-known. They include, among others, multi-tiered prevention approaches, school-wide prevention activities, involving families and communities, and integrating prevention efforts. Two of the top evidence-based initiatives – identified at the conference by experts from the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence – are the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). We are very pleased that S.B. 1138 would maintain the current-law language requiring schools to have a written prevention and intervention strategy in place, and encouraging them to initiate one or more evidence-based practices.

What we consistently hear from schools is that they need help in establishing those evidence-based practices. They need expert assistance and they need funding. To address that need, S.B. 1138 would establish a statewide safe school environment resource network that could seek federal and private funding in order to assist schools through training and support.

The resource network could become a one-stop shopping source on school climate – coordinated by SDE and other state leaders such as the Governor's Prevention Partnership and the Commission on Children – to help schools take the next step toward bullying prevention. The network would help schools ensure that they adopt clear policies, meet national standards, and engage in high-quality preventive practices. It would serve as an indication to funders that Connecticut is serious about bullying prevention, and that investment in our state's school climate initiatives will pay off in positive ways for children.

We would recommend one change to the network provision: that it expand beyond serving schools to provide assistance also to community-based organizations such as the Bully-Busters group in Norwich. Anti-bullying efforts are not limited to school buildings.

The bullying definition in the bill is much improved over the current statute. It adds cyberbullying, makes clear that bullying may occur through "written, verbal or electronic communication", and eliminates the "during the school year" phrase in the current-law definition that the Commission has heard causes some school officials to "wipe the slate clean" and ignore bullying patterns that began before the current school year. The definition, along with

other language at lines 108-112, makes clear that bullying need not occur on school grounds or through school-owned property in order for schools to respond. This is an important clarification in the law, since a great deal of student bullying occurs off grounds at bus stops, on the street or through electronic means.

We propose an additional feature be added to the bullying definition: "enumerated categories" recommended by the U.S. Department of Education to clarify that bullying includes illegal acts of harassment based on actual or perceived characteristics of students. Enumeration of specific characteristics would clarify that bullying often is based on actual or perceived characteristics of students, and it would tie the state and local bullying response to federal laws prohibiting harassment based on these characteristics. The U.S. Department of Education's December 2010 memo to states on bullying policy offers an example of statutory language that would strengthen the bill's definition.

Concerning SDE's leadership role, we recommend that, at line 183, the phrase "a model safe school environment plan for grades kindergarten to twelve" be made plural ("model safe school environment plans..."). Best practices dictate that school climate strategies should differ in an elementary school from those in a middle or high school. Therefore, SDE should develop or recommend a different model plan for each school level.

We also recommend that districts be required to inform SDE of any updates to their safe school environment plan. At line 142, districts have to submit their plan to SDE by January 1, 2012, but they are not required to submit a newly revised version to SDE after any future revision of the plan in future years. The result is that SDE, which is charged at line 194 with biennial "analysis of the responsive actions taken by school districts", may not be in possession of districts' latest plans as it undertakes that analysis every two years.

In summary, we cannot accept bullying as an inevitable fact of life. When children experience a negative school climate, the result is poorer education outcomes, greater danger, increased risk of health problems – and psychological harm that can spiral out of control toward suicide and other forms of violence. According to a 2002 study by the U.S. Secret Service, nearly three-quarters of school shooting attackers in the U.S. felt bullied, threatened, attacked, injured or persecuted prior to the shooting incident.

S.B. 1138 takes important steps to avert those negative outcomes – by encouraging preventive investments in safe school climate and requiring a rapid response to bullying. The bill would help improve student learning, reduce the likelihood of depression and suicide in youth who are targets of bullying— now and well into adulthood. The Commission on Children strongly urges the bill's passage.